
Airborne Heavy Weapons Company

Peace Enforcement Operations in Bosnia

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In December 1995 the 3d Battalion, 325th Infantry (Airborne Battalion Combat Team), deployed to Bosnia-Herzegovina for Operation *Joint Endeavor*. The first U.S. combat unit to arrive in the theater, the ABCT assumed the mission of securing Tuzla Air Base, headquarters of the U.S. Multinational Division (Task Force *Eagle*). Throughout its three-month stay in Bosnia, the Combat Team's Company E (Heavy Weapons) ranged across the American Sector and played a key role in the unit's success. This article describes the heavy weapons company's organization, training, and tactical employment in a stressful and challenging operational environment, and suggests lessons for its future use by the Infantry community in similar missions.

This unique organization, the 3/325 ABCT, served as the U.S. component of the Allied Command Europe Mobile Force (Land) and was based in Vicenza, Italy, as part of the Southern European Task Force. Although the team was built around a standard airborne infantry battalion, the unit modified tables of organization and equipment also included a beefed-up battle staff, an organic 105mm artillery battalion, a very large transportation platoon, combat and heavy engineer platoons, riggers, a large forward support company, an air defense platoon, and ground support radar and water purification elements. Except for the artillery battery, these elements were provisionally attached to the unit's parent headquarters, the Lion Brigade (Airborne). The most versatile unit in the ABCT, however, was the battalion's heavy weapons company. The soldiers and leaders of Company E provided much of the team's long-range fire-

power and mobility and played a decisive role in the battalion's outstanding success in Bosnia.

Although Company E was similar to the antiarmor companies in the airborne and air assault divisions, it differed significantly in mission and weaponry. The "heavy weapons" designation described the unit's responsibilities, based on its theater-specific missions, to provide heavy direct fires of all kinds in both mounted and dismounted modes. Like standard antiarmor companies, Company E fielded 20 TOW antitank systems, but it also had 10 Mk 19 automatic grenade launchers, 10 M2 .50-caliber heavy machineguns, 10 M60 medium machineguns, and 10 M249 light machineguns, in addition to individual weapons, which gave the unit impressive firepower and flexibility.

Organized into five platoons of four gun vehicles each, the company also traded its "soft top" platoon command vehicles for the "hard shell" variety with mounted light machineguns. This version was still a command and control vehicle, but one that offered better protection and augmented the platoon's firepower. Although the company enjoyed a high leader-to-led ratio, it suffered from a theater-wide shortage of 11H soldiers. The company struggled to maintain its three-man crews, since even a single missing soldier would render a crew combat ineffective. For operational deployments, the company was typically augmented with drivers from the brigade, not an ideal solution but probably the only viable one.

Although the company retained its primary tank-killing role, it also played other important roles as a fourth maneuver team headquarters for airfield

seizure (detaching some of its organic platoons and assuming control of rifle units); as enroute security, escort, reconnaissance, and counterreconnaissance operations; and as a mobile security, reserve, and counterattack force against dismounted threats. To strengthen rifle platoons during air assault operations, Company E was also tasked to organize and train machinegun teams for dismounted operations. These requirements—along with the need to remain highly proficient in heavy drop/airborne assault operations—severely taxed the company's leaders and training program.

Unquestionably, the number of assigned missions made focusing on any one of them extremely difficult, which was a key concern for the battalion's senior leaders. Relying on the company's outstanding NCO leaders and stressing live-fire training and crew drill, the battalion commander made a conscious decision to expand the company mission essential task list.

The company's ability to execute such a demanding mission load was tested repeatedly in the months leading up to the deployment. Throughout 1995, the team trained intensively to extract UN Protection Force units from the eastern enclaves in Bosnia and for noncombatant evacuation operations in Central Africa. For these contingencies, Company E reconfigured and retrained to provide mounted security at forward operating bases and dismounted gun teams to support air assaulting rifle companies, and even to operate as a dismounted rifle company. The company's ability to execute its antiarmor mission—a real concern, given its multiple missions—was validated two

months before the deployment to Bosnia, at U.S. Army Europe's Combat Maneuver Training Center. In a grueling rotation, the company exceeded expectations, destroying 19 tanks in one defensive engagement. In the final phase of the rotation—a five-day peace enforcement scenario modeled on Bosnia—the company continued to develop its skills in mounted patrolling, route reconnaissance and security, and mobile checkpoint operations. All training included the newly attached drivers.

These intensive training experiences—along with a demanding home station training program that focused on section and platoon battle drills and crew drills—brought the company to a high state of readiness by the fall of 1995. In November the ABCT was alerted for early deployment to Bosnia and began to ramp up. As the battle staff planned, the companies progressed through a rigorous program of mine awareness training, situational exercises, and platoon lane training oriented on the rules of engagement (ROEs).

Through the personal intervention of the commander-in-chief of U.S. Army Europe, ten M1109 uparmored high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) were delivered to Company E just before deployment. These vehicles would play a key role: They were light enough for air movement in C130s but protected enough to win in a small arms engagement. In the second week of December, the team moved to Aviano Air Base and began rigging for air movement. Then European Command issued the "execute" order, and the team took to the air.

Upon arrival, the soldiers of Company E expected to conduct mounted patrols inside and outside the perimeter of Tuzla Airbase and provide the mobile component of the ABCT's quick reaction force (QRF). While these missions occupied the unit throughout its time in Bosnia, it faced an unexpected challenge in the frequency and duration of taskings to conduct independent operations far from Tuzla.

Routine patrolling and escort missions in and around Tuzla began upon arrival and typically absorbed three of the company's five platoons. Initially,

at least one platoon was also required each night to help with surveillance of the southern sector of the airfield using its night vision systems. With one platoon always on standby for the QRF, routine operations, in addition to mission planning and maintenance, committed the entire company seven days a week.

New missions soon pushed the heavy weapons platoons to the forefront of the action. Problems with bridging the Sava River delayed the arrival of 1st Armored Division tank and mechanized infantry units in sector. For almost a month, the ABCT served as the only combat maneuver unit in the Task Force *Eagle* area of responsibility (AOR), which encompassed hundreds of square kilometers. An additional complication was the delayed arrival of the Russian Airborne Brigade, which had been slated to occupy a large sector to the north and east of Tuzla. The ABCT mission was therefore expanded to include the temporary occupation of the Russian Sector as well as frequent escort missions as much as 150 kilometers from Tuzla. With its mobility and firepower, Company E quickly became the focus of the battalion's tactical operations.

A typical mission tasked one platoon to escort a high-value element to areas in the zone of separation (ZOS), a belt of neutral territory spelled out in the Dayton Accords and roughly defined by the former Confrontation Line running through Bosnia. In the early stages of the mission, exact locations of mined areas were incompletely recorded, while armed units of the various factions remained in place in and around the ZOS. Tensions remained high as each night brought indiscriminate firing. With a mandate to enforce the Dayton Accords, the battalion was kept busy opening routes through the ZOS, overseeing demining operations, and monitoring the removal and storage of weapons from the ZOS, as well as providing security and attending high-level meetings with faction commanders.

The heavy weapons platoons traveled fully combat loaded and, like the rest of the battalion, employed responsive ROEs, with weapons loaded and on

safe. Company E elements enjoyed great credibility with members of local factions, who knew that these rugged soldiers, though highly disciplined, were prepared to use their weapons if threatened.

A platoon typically mounted one Mk 19 and one .50-caliber machinegun for long-range suppression. For rapid close-range action, the platoon mounted an M249 and an M60, respectively, on the remaining two gun vehicles, thus providing for weapons coverage of both near and far threats. The platoon command vehicle was dedicated to communication, fire support coordination, and navigation.

The attachments normally included an engineer vehicle, an Air Force enlisted tactical air controller, a mechanic, and a combat medic, augmented by a combat lifesaver in each vehicle. For long-distance missions, a communications NCO with tactical satellite (TAC-SAT) radio was attached. For missions outside FM radio range, the company commander or a field grade officer normally served as officer-in-charge.

In addition to the threat from mines and armed factions, adverse weather conditions, poor roads, and mountainous terrain posed serious hazards to the soldiers of Company E. These soldiers were well equipped with cold-weather gear, and aggressive small-unit leadership prevented cold-weather injuries. Apart from straying into unmarked minefields, the most serious threat to troop safety was mountain driving in poor weather (sometimes with visibility as low as five meters). In this environment, slow speeds, tire chains, careful navigation, vehicle separation, tight unit standing operating procedures, platoon risk assessments, and driver awareness all played a role in avoiding accident or injury. (As one example, one movement of 85 kilometers through very mountainous terrain took eight hours.) The key factor, however, was the strong leadership displayed by the company's highly experienced NCOs.

The experiences of Company E in Bosnia offer important lessons for non-mechanized infantry battalions in future peace enforcement missions. Whether airborne, air assault, or light infantry,

these units all have gun vehicles that can play a prominent role in determining the success or failure of the mission.

Training. Commanders should weigh the advantages of expanding the mission task list for these units against the disadvantages. Multiple missions and different weapon systems pose a severe training challenge. Because of its high priority in the theater, the ABCT had access to training areas in Europe, adequate ammunition, and the time to qualify gunners on all weapon systems. If the resources are not available, standard antiarmor companies and platoons should not be asked to assume expanded roles.

The team's 11H soldiers were asked to maintain proficiency in antiarmor warfare while mastering multiple weapon systems, both mounted and dismounted. Initially, leaders experienced resistance, because individual soldiers perceived their role as mounted tank killers. Changing the unit culture to embrace new missions while retaining mastery of the antitank mission thus became a first-order priority. Lacking mission training plans for heavy weapons missions, company leaders were forced to develop their own—a tribute to their professionalism and competence. Clearly, it is time to institutionalize detailed .50-caliber machinegun and Mk 19 training programs for antiarmor soldiers.

In a peace enforcement environment, countermine operations, vehicle identification, and vehicle recovery are key tasks. Company E frequently encountered live mines at old checkpoints and on the shoulders of roads, but several factors helped them avoid the mines—local guides, the aggressive use of current mine overlays provided by higher headquarters, and familiarization with terrain likely to be mined. Intensive countermine training before deployment, the use of combat engineers down to platoon level, and alert observation by leaders and troopers—along with liberal doses of luck—enabled the heavy weapons company to avoid any mine injuries or fatalities.

Vehicle identification proved challenging as well. Some implementation force (IFOR) units used BMPs and

BTR-70s, factional units occasionally fielded NATO vehicles stolen from UNPROFOR, and Nordic units used vehicles entirely unfamiliar to U.S. soldiers. These soldiers even encountered fully operational T-34 tanks. Detailed S-2 handouts, pre-mission briefings, and experience gained through daily operations—as well as an aggressive predeployment training program—enabled the unit to cope with an initially confusing array of combat vehicles.

Vehicle recovery posed particular challenges because of the distances at which the unit operated from the battalion. The single five-ton wrecker assigned to the ABCT proved a poor option since it required separate escort and could not move well off the road in the prevailing terrain and weather. Self-recovery thus became the norm. The battalion's few tow bars were given to Company E, and helicopter sling sets and tow straps were also used. Always a dangerous operation, especially in limited visibility and bad weather, vehicle recovery is also leader intensive, and the NCOs always supervised closely. The company executive officer played a crucial role in vehicle recovery and monitored vehicle and equipment maintenance during the non-stop assignment of missions.

Equipment. The M1109 uparmored HMMWVs became the mainstay for long distance missions. Although heavy, they proved powerful and rugged in mountainous terrain, mechanically reliable, and stable on slippery mountain roads. With improved suspension systems, they easily coped with loads greater than normal. Their built-in survivability gave the crews tremendous confidence and enabled them to accept greater risks.

The M1109's enhanced crew protection provided a decisive advantage that allowed platoons to conduct their mission aggressively, a key lesson learned. Bolt-on armor kits were requested for the rest of the unit's vehicles, but none arrived in time. Given the limited protection provided in standard gun vehicles, some form of improved armor for light vehicles will undoubtedly save lives in future missions of this type.

Because of its unique mission, the 3/325 ABCT was equipped with a variety of communications systems, most of which were used by the heavy weapons company. TACSAT radios proved the most important, as they were the only means of reliable communication beyond FM range, which was often affected by the mountainous terrain. Newly fielded SINCGARS (single-channel ground and airborne radio systems) performed well and were used frequently, both mounted in the vehicles and in the manpack mode. The commander's PRC 109 HF radio was not used because it lacked a voice-secure capability. The lack of some type of vehicle intercom system was a serious handicap that should be addressed by force developers; communication between gunner and vehicle commander is crucial. (This capability is standard in all other Army combat vehicles.)

Heavy weapons leaders were liberally supplied with global positioning systems (GPS), and these proved vital because of the inexact maps issued for the mission. (One standard map was based on a 1943 Wehrmacht map product, and the 1:100,000 and even 1:250,000 map scales were commonly used.) GPS allowed for precise obstacle overlays throughout the division AOR—a key force protection measure. The system is best used with an external antenna mount, bracket, and cable, but these were not available for the Bosnia mission. As a result, constant use while mounted caused 10 of the company's 15 systems to fail.

Standard personal gear for mounted operations included impact resistant goggles, balaclava head covers, cold weather suits and gloves, and medium weight cold weather boots. This equipment was indispensable. It enabled gunners to maintain maximum security in the wet cold, which would have been impossible without the balaclava due to wind chill. Ballistic helmets and vests were worn at all times, although gunners stowed masks and load carrying equipment (LCE) inside the vehicle when mounted in the turret (protective masks and LCE were always worn outside the vehicle). Gunners carried 9mm pistols mounted on the front

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of their vests for easy access.

Simple improvements that could greatly aid mission accomplishment include external mounting racks for ammunition (7.62mm, 5.56mm, .50 caliber), infrared driving lights, vehicle mounted searchlights for checkpoint or roadblock operations at night, and fire control devices such as the LPL30 laser pointer. (The LPL30 is the one item the company leaders did not have that might have proved critical if firing had broken out.) With this device, a heavy weapons platoon leader can effectively control fires at night to maximum distances, and this control is imperative, considering the non-linear boundaries often encountered in peace enforcement scenarios. The AN/PVS-6 infrared observation set, a hand-held system that provides range and direction, should also be standard issue for platoon leaders. In addition, vehicle crews should be issued M4 carbines instead of the bulkier M16s.

Operations. The heavy weapons company became a victim of its own success in Bosnia when its inherent flexibility and high standard of performance resulted in serious overcommitment. With few assets to call on in the early stages of the operation, the planners of Task Force *Eagle* increased the frequency and duration of company

missions to the breaking point. As time for planning, rehearsals, maintenance, and troop rest disappeared, company and battalion leaders ultimately appealed for relief through the chain of command. No infantryman likes to say "no" when the slightest mishap can cost lives and threaten the mission, but unit leaders have a responsibility to gauge the situation and intervene when they consider it necessary.

The lack of support for platoons operating far from help was a constant concern for the ABCT commander. Any incident—a mine strike, a clash with local factions, a vehicle accident or breakdown—could have put Company E soldiers at great risk. The battalion's habitually assigned Air Force personnel provided an essential link to fire support and assistance with their expertise and state-of-the-art long range communications. In some cases, helicopters supplied elements with fuel and rations to enable them to complete their missions. Task Force *Eagle*'s attack helicopters could be summoned in the event of trouble, but poor flying weather often limited their availability. For the most part, the command relied upon the initiative and resourcefulness of leaders at the platoon level, as well as their training and previous operational experience.

Several factors played important roles in Company E's outstanding success in Bosnia—a well conceived training plan, adequate ammunition and training areas, strong leadership from junior leaders, and highly motivated, physically fit soldiers who were confident in their leaders, training, and equipment. The unit's flexible, multifunctional organization and high density of leaders gave the combat team commander a range of options that he exploited to the limit.

In later stages, the U.S. presence in Bosnia would take on a much stronger character. But in those tenuous early weeks, the U.S. flag flew far and wide in Bosnia on the gun vehicles of heavy weapons troopers.

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